

1976 Square Dance Historical Pageant

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Where else, but at the world's largest square dance. Held at the 1976 National Square Dance Convention (NSDC) in Anaheim, CA. The attendance at the convention was almost 40 thousand square dancers, callers, and cuers. The total attendance at the three performances of the pageant was well over 20,000 people plus a cast of over 500 dancers and callers.

The plans started four years ahead of the convention when California was awarded the 25th National Square Dance Convention. Since the convention was to be held during the bicentennial celebration of the United States, it was fitting that a Historical Dance Pageant be presented as part of the special events at that convention.

John and Marge Conley were the director/producers for the pageant. They approached the Lloyd Shaw Foundation (LSF) in 1974 and asked their assistance as consultants for the pageant. Judy and I were young members — in our thirties — and were asked to be the interface between the two organizations. We had an interest in historical dances because we were members of the LSF, but only a rudimentary knowledge of the history of square dance.

For Judy and me, it was plunging headfirst into a new and exciting world. I was calling square dances. Judy was cueing round dances. We both had experience in exhibition dance teams and in theatrical productions at the college level, but this was a production of a size that we had never experienced before.

Mrs Lloyd Shaw had directed and produced the first National Square Dance Pageant in 1959 at the NSDC in Denver Colorado. I had performed in that pageant as the director and caller for the Aggie Haylofters Exhibition Team from Colorado State University. We knew generally how the pageant had been organized and presented. Mrs Shaw knew in detail how it had been organized and presented. She was a world wide expert in the historical dances that preceded square dancing.

The dances that were to be presented were the ancestors of the Modern Western Square Dance. This included a wide variety of dance forms described in the pageant booklet titled "American Square Dancing Through the Years .. 1776 - 1976". A copy of this book can be found on this website.

The cast for the scenes in the pageant were gathered from each of the areas of the United States where the dance forms had first been popular. The goal was to make the dances and dancers inclusive of the entire United States.

Judy and I had the great pleasure of meeting and working with some of the most knowledgeable dance leaders in the United States. You have heard the phrase, "Being in Hawg Heaven." Judy and I were there.

In addition to being consultants, we were asked to produce one scene in the pageant. We lived in New Mexico and one of the three important sources for the rebirth of square dancing in the 1930's and 1940's was an exhibition group named the "Blue Bonnet Set" under the direction of Herb Greggerson from El Paso, Texas. Herb and his wife Pauline retired to Ruidoso, NM.

New Mexico was picked to portray their role in the pageant. Judy and I recruited dancers from Albuquerque, NM and we spent much time recreating the "Blue Bonnet Dancers" with the assistance and recollections of Herb and Pauline Greggerson.

Judy and my job, as consultants from the LSF, was an easy job. Many of the dance leaders for the dances presented in 1959 were still active and still willing to present the same scenes as they presented in 1959. The new scenes in the pageant were parceled out to groups such as the group Judy and I directed in New Mexico.

In our case, we had access to Herb and Pauline Greggerson,. Pauline give us pictures of their costumes and dress patterns and advise on how to sew them. Herb provided me with authentic dances patterns and styling tips that were used by the "Blue Bonnet Set". Our task was to make sure everything was as authentic as we could make it.

In California, when expert sources could not be found for some dances, various square dance clubs accepted the task of learning dances they had never danced in their lives. This also meant making authentic costumes from pictures found in libraries . There were many telephone calls to dance leaders with more knowledge of the dances and the times.

It was hard work, but fun. John and Marge Conley were excellent directors and they had a committee of about 25 people to help in all the tasks they faced.

Judy and my role in this pageant changed as plans for the pageant were developed. The pageant was to be presented in the arena at the Anaheim Convention Center. The arena was 146 by 207 feet with stadium seating on all four sides. The total seating capacity was 6500 in the fixed seating above the arena floor.

In the first pageant in Denver, all the scenes, were done in the middle of a similar large arena. This meant there was a large distance between the audience and the performers. The California pageant was going to try and solve this problem by making better use of the 28,000 Sq Ft of space. Essentially, the production was to be done as "theater in the round".

Judy and I had been very involved in "large area" productions at Colorado State University as well as theater and stage productions including "theater in the round". We had participated in the planning of these events so we had many options we could offer as the problems came up.

The problems included not being able to use large sets or props. Lighting all came from six large spotlights that were used for events like ice skating productions. How do you hide dancers entering or exiting the floor? We provided options we had seen in the events we had helped organize in college and in productions we had worked on after graduation.

The solution chosen was to use electric candles to build a visual outline of the United States on the floor of the arena. Each scene was presented in the area within the United States where the dance had been popular. This way, the distance from the audience varied as the scenes were played. At least some of the scenes were close to the various sections of the audience part of the time.

The six spotlights could create pools of lights that would light the current scene and thus have areas of darkness where up coming scenes could be set up and the dancers positioned. It made the change of scenes occur smoothly because entries and exits could be done in the dark areas and this provided little breaks in the action. This was the same technique as is used in "theater in the round" with fixed areas of light.

The next problem was how to move the audience viewpoint from scene to scene without darkness or sudden light changes. We suggested using a traveling MC. The MC would be picked up by spotlights as each scene was finished and the MC would walk to the edge to the area of the next scene while speaking from a script about the next scene. Then the lights would fade on the MC and come up on the dancers. The MC was planned to be some famous Hollywood actor or actress.

Judy and I were asked to write the script for MC. This was done under the excellent tutorage of Dorothy Stott Shaw with input from a lot of people much smarter than the two of us. I learned a lot about how to be a good story teller.

Over two years, the pieces started to come together. The scenes were chosen. John and Marge Conley attended a summer dance week of the Lloyd Shaw Foundation. We talked for hours. The four of us really got a crash course in dance history and event production. The Lloyd Shaw Foundation week had plenty of people with experience in doing smaller pageants. We sat and listened and learned and dreamed. It was wonderful.

Since the cast was scattered through out the U.S., the cast never performed together until the day before the first performance. John and Marge's committee people told us where to stand around the edges of the arena out of sight of the audience. We did one entry and exit dry run. Each scene had time scheduled in a separate area for practicing each dance.

A Hollywood actor/actress as the MC was never found. Judy and I had written the script so we were asked to be the MCs about two weeks before the pageant. We decided to share the spotlight and rushed to find costumes that would be appropriate.

Neither of us had ever performed before an audience of 7000+ people. That included all the cast who certainly would know if we screwed up. The saving grace was that only a few people had a complete copy of the script. If we could walk to correct place on the arena floor and say something that sounded intelligent, the audience would never know we goofed.

It was a magic event. John and Marge's committee had worked out the most minute details with the staff of the Anaheim Convention Center. Everyone had detailed instructions. Everyone did their job.

The pageant was two hours in length. Every scene had a "starter" from Conley's staff. They knew, to the second, when and how to get the actors on and off the floor. They handled stage fright with calmness and professionalism. All these people were members of local square dance clubs. All the scenes were played by non professional dancers. Not one soul, except the convention center staff, was paid a dime.

The original plan was to present the pageant twice. After the first performance, the demand for tickets was so high that a third performance was scheduled and quickly sold out. Every performance had a standing room only audience area. They finally just ended up crowding in as many people as fire regulations would permit.

One of the performances was video taped by a local television station. Short film and VHS versions were made from clips from these tapes. Since performance was two hours in length, a majority of the footage was never used because the videos were limited to 28 minutes so television stations could use them and still fit in commercials.

The rest of the video footage was eventually lost. The TV station owned the video tapes and refused to release them.

However, the event certainly lived in the memories of well over 20,000 people. We made lots of lifelong friends. There are videos on YouTube that show parts of what happened. Judy and I have spent a life time creating other pageants and exhibitions and showing people the history of the American Square Dance.

For us it became a life changing event.